FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
The Endless Journey Starts

December 31, 2000
John M. Buchanan

It is not over,
this birthing.
There are always newer skies
into which
God can throw stars.
When we begin to think
that we can predict the Advent of God,
that we can box the Christ
in a stable in Bethlehem,
that's just the time
that God will be born
in a place we can't imagine and won't believe.
Those who wait for God
watch with their hearts and not their eyes,
listening
always listening
for angel words.

Ann Weems
"Kneeling in Bethlehem"

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Colossians 2:12-17 (NRSV)
Luke 2:8-20 (NRSV)

"The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them." Luke 2:20 (NRSV)

Dear God, you came among us quietly and humbly in the birth of a child. So now, in these quiet moments, come to us again. Startle us with your truth and open our hearts and minds to your love, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

How quickly it is over. We begin to prepare for it weeks and months in advance. Each year I do an independent study of the date when the first Christmas item appears in one of our neighbors' business establishments. This year it was, I recall, the middle of October, the 16th, to be exact, when I first saw it. Lord & Taylor took the prize with a small, obnoxious, mechanized Santa, stationed on a table at a second floor entrance, gyrating and swiveling his hips in time to "Santa Claus is Coming to Town," two full weeks before Halloween.

The church itself begins the liturgical observance of Advent four weeks before Christmas and in this neighborhood, at least, we all know that serious activities are upon us the week before Thanksgiving when the floats come down Michigan Avenue and the tiny white lights are turned on.

Then suddenly it is over. The oldest Christian customs—the season of Christmastide, beginning on December 25th and extending for twelve days—the Twelve Days of Christmas—until Epiphany, January 6, when tradition has it that Magi arrived in Bethlehem—all of that is swept away by the reality of December 26 post-Christmas sales catalogs. It is over.

Even here, in the church, we occasionally succumb. We're exhausted too. It has been a slow week. We were recovering like everybody else—not celebrating anything. Today has always been known among the preaching community as "Low Sunday," along with the Sunday after Easter.

The Poet, W. H. Auden, catches the sense of the occasion. One of my Christmas favorites, which I pull down from the shelf and read every year—W. H. Auden's *Christmas Oratorio, For the Time Being,* the conclusion:

> **Well, so that is that. Now we must**
> **dismantle the tree,**
> **Putting the decorations back into their**
> **cardboard boxes—**
> **Some have got broken—and carrying**
> **them to the attic.**
> **The holly and the mistletoe must be**
> **taken down and burnt,**
> **And the children got ready for**

school. There are enough
Left-overs to do, warmed up, for
the rest of the week—
Not that we have much appetite,
having drunk such a lot,
stayed up so late, attempted—
quite unsuccessfully—
To love all of our relatives, and in
general
Grossly overestimated our powers. Once again
as in previous years we have seen the
actual vision and failed
To do more than entertain it as an agreeable
Possibility, once again we sent Him away,
Begging though to remain His
disobedient servant.

The birth of Jesus and all the traditions it has generated have long since been appropriated and radically transformed by the culture. A wonderful play, *The Last Night of Ballyhoo,* with Fourth Church member, Nancy Baird, in the cast, is about a Jewish family in Atlanta, struggling with the issues and implications of maintaining their Jewish identity while making it in mainstream American culture. The play takes place in the 1930's and it begins at Christmas with Lala Levy decorating a Christmas tree and singing "We Three Kings of Orient Are." "Star of Wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright . . . ."

As she places a star on the top of the tree her aunt objects:

> **"Jewish Christmas trees don't have stars.**
>
> **"Why not?**
>
> **"You know perfectly well. The star is a symbol of the birth of the Messiah. If you have a star on the tree you might as well go on down to Rich's and buy a manger scene and stick it in the front yard . . . ."**
>
> **Her niece objects—"But we have a Christmas tree right here in the front window . . . ."**
>
> **And the aunt explains:**
>
> **"A Christmas tree is another thing altogether. It's a festive decoration like a Halloween pumpkin or a Valentine heart. Everybody with any sense in their head knows that Christmas is just another American holiday if you leave out all that (business) about Jesus being born. Now take down that star."**

Aunt Beulah has it right—Christian religious symbols have been adopted by the culture—and as that culture has become more diverse religiously and more secular, the symbols have lost their original meaning. Santa Claus, after all, once upon a time was St. Nicholas. I'm not lamenting the loss, however.

Thoughtful theologians and historians have always warned that there is an inherent danger to the integrity of religion when the culture or the government appropriates the religious traditions and symbols. That's why the Presbyterian Church is not in favor of prayer in the public schools.

Every year at this time, somebody sues a city or town for sponsoring the specifically Christian celebration of Christmas. This year, the residents of Lexington, Massachusetts, are quarreling over the appropriateness of a nativity scene on the town's historic green. The local Knights of Columbus, trying to maintain a decades-old tradition, want to put a crèche in the public square. Other residents requested permission to decorate the green with displays honoring their religion. Plans included a temple to the Egyptian Sun God Ra and a Hindu-related herd of cows. Public officials, with visions of those cows grazing on the green, responded by banning all displays. The Knights of Columbus are appealing.

One of the important but powerful realities for those of us who are members of and responsible for the life of the Christian Church at the beginning of the 21st century, is that we can no longer rely on the culture—the government—the schools—to support our enterprise. Never is that more clear than at Christmas—when the culture, particularly the economy, has already carefully removed all traces of the specifically Christian content of Christmas. Many people regard that as a terrible loss, a diminishment of Christian position and influence in our culture. Many want to fight back by insisting on prayer at football games and graduation, or putting the Ten Commandments on the courtroom wall. But the danger—the real danger—is that in the process of defending the old arrangement, Christians are reduced to arguing that the symbols don't mean much anyway.

Thoughtful people, instead of wringing hands and lamenting that we no longer play a privileged role in the culture, are suggesting that we have a God given opportunity to be the Church of Jesus Christ, authentically, without apology, and without the artificial props the culture and government used to provide; that we are quite capable of preserving the traditions and more importantly, remembering what they mean.

bolted down

The birth is beautiful. Almost anybody can be touched emotionally by the birth of a baby. But the church knows the baby grew up and became a strong man, and taught a revolutionary ethic of unconditional love and practiced forgiveness and expressed inclusive grace and acceptance for all the ones the culture oppressed and excluded. The church remembers that the baby grew up and got into a lot of trouble as a man for teaching and living out his notion of what God's kingdom looks like—a new arrangement without the old boundaries—an arrangement where all people are loved and affirmed and welcomed at the banquet table. The church remembers in W. H. Auden's unforgettable image:

> The Christmas Feast is already
> a fading memory
> And already the mind begins
> to be vaguely aware
> Of an unpleasant whiff of apprehension
> at the thought
> of Lent and Good Friday which cannot,
> after all, now
> Be very far off.

The church remembers a part of the story the culture—particularly at Christmas—would prefer to forget—namely that the shadow of a cross falls over the nativity scene.

In her Advent meditation for Christmas Day, Kathleen Norris wrote, "In our jubilant observation of this day, it is good to recall that we are celebrating, not only the birth of Christ, but the revelation of God's great love for all creation."

This birth is not an end in itself. It is a beginning. It is, in the deepest sense, God acting to restart creation—a new creation.

The birth is a sign that God is alive and at work in the world. And in the deepest sense, Christ comes again, is born again, when lives are transformed by his love, when forgiven and restored men and women like you and me begin to live new lives, as Paul described it to new Christians in the city of Colossae—lives of compassion and kindness and humility and patience and forgiveness—when something of the love we celebrated at Christmas begins to live in us and reach out through us to all the people around us, who rely on us and who need us.

It is not the end of the story, just the beginning. And Christ is born again when, in his name, people are loved and accepted for who they are, and enabled to be everything they can become.

It is not the end but the beginning. And Christ is born again when hungry people are fed, and naked people clothed and homeless people sheltered, when the blind are given sight and the oppressed set free.

Christ is born again when, in the painfully difficult and complex relations between people, locked in conflict—Israelis and Palestinians, Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, for instance—risks are taken, not for security, but for peace with justice.

Christ is born when, in painful struggles about questions of race, gender and sexual orientation, graceful inclusion replaces years of exclusion and oppression.

Christ is born when in the political arena, decisions are made not for ideological reasons, but because they are good and right and fair.

Christ is born again when in the private arena of personal relationships, with spouses, lovers, friends, children, old wounds are healed by forgiveness, and reconciliation happens because of Christ-like unconditional love.

Christ is born again, when in quiet, almost invisible ways, the children are loved and nurtured and given what they need to become all God wants them to be.

Christ is born in quiet, almost invisible ways, when individual hurts and wounds are bound up and lonely people embraced and the grieving comforted and given the gift of love.

A dear woman whose husband died earlier this year, was here Christmas Eve. I greeted her and told her I knew it wasn't easy for her to be here. He loved Christmas Eve in this church. "I'm here in his honor," she said, and then she told me that when it came time to put her tree up this year, she did it, but found that she had no heart for decorating it with lights and ornaments. She could go no further, so she let the empty tree stand. A few of her friends heard about it and invited themselves

to lunch one Sunday in December, and after lunch they got out the supplies they had brought and made paper angels and then decorated the tree, in his memory, and in his honor, and Christ—the Lord Christ, who was born and who calls us to live lives of love and compassion and justice, the Lord Christ, who in his own death and resurrection, forever defeated the power of death—Christ was born again.

It is not the end, but the beginning. Luke never tells us what happened to the shepherds when, after visiting the newborn in Bethlehem, they returned to their tasks. But surely nothing was ever the same.

About them—and about us—on this day, the poet, W. H. Auden wrote:

> **Tonight for the first time the prison**
> **gates have opened.**
> **Music and sudden light**
> **Have interrupted our routine tonight**
> **And swept the filth of habit**
> **from our hearts.**
> **O here and now our endless journey starts.**

It is not the end. It is the beginning of an endless journey—following him, living out our love in this world, our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be all honor and glory, forever and ever.

Amen.